

Durham Research Online

Deposited in DRO:

24 August 2015

Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Gray, Patrick (2016) 'The compassionate stoic : Brutus as accidental hero.', *Shakespeare Jahrbuch.*, 152 . pp. 30-44.

Further information on publisher's website:

<http://shakespeare-gesellschaft.de/en/jahrbuch/volume-152-2016/contents.html>

Publisher's copyright statement:

Additional information:

Use policy

The full-text may be used and/or reproduced, and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- a full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- a [link](#) is made to the metadata record in DRO
- the full-text is not changed in any way

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

Please consult the [full DRO policy](#) for further details.

The Compassionate Stoic: Brutus as Accidental Hero

In *Julius Caesar*, Brutus is a deeply attractive character, not only to his wife, Portia, and his friend, Cassius, but even to his murder victim, Caesar, as well as his chief rival, Antony. What makes Brutus so appealing, however, is a quality which he himself sees as a moral vice: compassion, including with it a sense of civic duty. Despite his initial misgivings, Brutus backslides into political engagement: Cassius lures him away from Senecan philosophical isolation back into an obsolescent Ciceronian enthusiasm for service to the state. His kind-heartedness is political, as well as ethical, finding expression in a sense of *noblesse oblige*. He tries to withdraw from public affairs, to “live unknown” like an Epicurean, but he has too keen a sense of his responsibilities or what Cicero might call his *officia* (‘roles, obligations’) as a husband, friend, and patriot; he cannot shake his old-fashioned *pietas* (‘duty, reverence’). Even more striking, perhaps, given his ostensible Stoicism, is Brutus’s tendency to give way to compassion, like a Christian. Pity is an emotion which he sees, like Seneca, as an embarrassing and distracting weakness. Nevertheless, his efforts to maintain a sense of command over his own inner life repeatedly break down. When he sees he has hurt his friend, Cassius, or his wife, Portia, he yields to a humane and generous desire to comfort them in their distress. This unbidden empathy, like his decision to engage in politics, is incompatible with his chosen “philosophy” (4.3.143).¹ His own ideal self is not the one which Antony describes, the Republican hero, animated by concern for the “common good” (5.5.73), but instead, the quasi-mythical figure of the Stoic *sapiens* (‘wise man’): a hero of philosophical detachment.

Effectively, Shakespeare depicts Brutus as torn between two opposed visions of heroism: Stoic and proto-Christian. He aims to become an exemplary Stoic sage. But he fails to remain indifferent to the imminent collapse of the Roman Republic. He cannot bring himself to

alienate his own wife, Portia, or his friend, Cassius. In his concern for other people, Brutus reveals an aspect of his character which cannot be reconciled to his philosophical ambition: an intransigent streak of kindness. For Shakespeare, as well as his audience, shaped by the values of a Christian milieu, Brutus's deep-set sense of empathy is attractive. It fits the Christian model of heroism: Christ's self-sacrifice for love. For Brutus himself, however, acts of pity, including his own, are contemptible. His heroism, insofar as it is analogous to Christian heroism, is inadvertent, "accidental" (4.3.144), rather than deliberate, emerging despite his own best efforts. His reaction to his wife's death, especially, stands out as a kind of *felix culpa*, redeeming him as a character from otherwise-insufferable Stoic posturing. For a Stoic, love such as Christ's is not a form of heroism, but a dangerous weakness. As Francis Bacon explains, "He that hath wife and children, hath given hostages to fortune." When Brutus grieves for his wife, it humanizes him in the eyes of the audience. To a Christian, tears can be noble; Christ himself weeps at the tomb of Lazarus. What Brutus wants, however, is to be instead what a Christian would call *hard-hearted*. As he himself sees it, his concern for others' well-being is not virtuous, but instead, a damning lapse in his effort to maintain, at all times, at least an appearance of Stoic constancy. Christian *caritas* has no place in that vision of an ideal self, the remote, self-sufficient philosopher exalted in Senecan Neostoicism. There is no room there for political activism; not even for more discrete, personal acts of human fellow-feeling. Compassion by its very nature entails a loss of self-control; a surrender of the emotional autonomy which Seneca, especially, praises as the *summum bonum*.

Shakespeare invokes older, more civic-minded Roman thought through the figure of Lucius Junius Brutus, Brutus's ancestor, famous as the man who drove out the tyrannical Tarquins: a flesh-and-blood character drawn from history, or at least from quasi-historical legend. Within Stoic philosophy, however, the hero who represents the ideal self is often described instead in

the abstract simply as the *sapiens*, the ‘wise man’ or ‘sage’. In Shakespeare’s tragedy, this figure appears as well, in a sense, in that Junius Brutus is represented by a statue. Reflecting on Seneca in his *Praise of Folly*, Erasmus condemns his ideal *sapiens* as “a marble statue of a man, utterly unfeeling and quite impervious to all human emotion.”² A statue is a vivid symbol of disinterestedness: a visual incarnation of Stoic *apatheia*.

Seneca for his part sometimes identifies the figure of the *sapiens* with specific historical individuals: Cato, Socrates. But that identification is pressurized, temporary, and subject to doubt. In his essay “On cruelty,” for instance, Montaigne turns against Seneca; after much thought, he concludes that Cato and Socrates did not in fact conform, as Seneca suggests, to the template of the Stoic *sapiens*. Even at their most heroic moment, the very instant of their suicide, they each felt some touch of some strong emotion. “Witness the younger Cato,” Montaigne writes. “I cannot believe that he merely maintained himself in the attitude that the rules of the Stoic sect ordained for him, sedate, without emotion, and impassible.”³

Shakespeare’s Brutus shows signs of the same tension. He describes himself as “with himself at war” (1.2.46), “vexed” with “passions of some difference” (1.2.39-40).

Like Hamlet’s Stoic friend, Horatio, the Stoic *sapiens* can often come across as a curious cipher: a mere blank space, albeit with praise attached.⁴ Typically, for instance, he is described apophatically, more notable for what he is not (“passion’s slave” [3.2.72]) than for what he is.⁵ Even so, the Stoics introduce him as a convenient shorthand. Even if he remains somewhat notional and indefinite, the ‘wise man’ as a placeholder crystallizes their theorizing into a personification. Seneca describes the *sapiens* as “calm” and “unshaken.” He has “attained perfection”; his “mind” is like “the superlunary world,” “always serene.”⁶ The figure of the sage also deflects possible charges of hypocrisy. By directing attention to people such as Cato and Socrates, Seneca need not present himself as a hero of his own moral system. “I hope someday to be a wise man,” he explains, “but meanwhile I am not a wise

man.”⁷ This modesty is a trope which he inherits from his Hellenistic Greek precursors, as he reveals in an anecdote about the Stoic philosopher Panaetius.

I think Panaetius gave a charming answer to the youth who asked whether the wise man would fall in love: “As to the wise man, we shall see. What concerns you and me, who are still a great distance from the wise man, is to ensure that we do not fall into a state of affairs which is disturbed, powerless, subservient to another, and worthless to oneself.”⁸

This habit of speech, however, gives rise to an obvious question. Is the ‘wise man’ wholly notional? In the course of human history, has any flesh-and-blood person ever fit this category? If not, could anyone ever even conceivably come to exist who might someday, somewhere live up to its criteria? A living, breathing hero of *apatheia*?

Alexander of Aphrodisias, a Hellenistic opponent of Stoicism, insists that “the majority of men are bad.” Nevertheless, he is willing to grant that “there have been just one or two good men, as their fables maintain, like some absurd and unnatural creature rarer than the Ethiopian phoenix.”⁹ Even Stoic philosophers themselves, however, sometimes concede that the *sapiens* might not exist. Chrysippus confesses that “on account of their extreme magnitude and beauty we [Stoics] seem to be stating things which are like fictions and not in accordance with man and human nature.” And he admits, “Vice cannot be removed completely.”¹⁰ Epictetus also tries to temper expectation. “Is it possible to remain quite faultless? That is beyond our power... We must be content if we avoid ... a few faults.”¹¹ Cleanthes is the most optimistic of the Hellenistic Stoics, and even he gives little room for hope. “Man walks in wickedness all his life, or, at any rate, for the greater part of it. If he ever attains to virtue, it is late, and at the very sunset of his days.”¹²

With more confidence than his Greek sources, Seneca insists that it is possible for us to perfect ourselves, that is, to free ourselves from passion. However, the feat is extremely

unusual. “A good man,” “one of the first class,” “springs, perhaps, into existence, like the phoenix, only once in five hundred years.”¹³ “Perhaps”: even here he hedges his bets. In his essay *De constantia* (‘On Constancy’), Seneca rebukes his friend Serenus for his doubts, but then trails off into careful qualifications of his claims.

There is no reason for you to say, Serenus, as your habit is, that this wise man of ours is nowhere to be found. He is not a fiction of us Stoics, a sort of phantom glory of human nature, nor is he a mere conception, the mighty semblance of a thing unreal, but we have shown him in the flesh just as we delineate him, and shall show him – though perchance not often; after a long lapse of years, only one. For greatness which transcends the limit of the ordinary and common type is produced but rarely.¹⁴

Like Seneca’s Serenus, in his *Praise of Folly*, Erasmus censures Seneca for “removing all emotion whatsoever from the wise man.”¹⁵ Seneca denies that he makes any such claim: “I do not withdraw the wise man from the category of man, nor do I deny him the sense of pain as though he were a rock that has no feelings at all.”¹⁶ Some things do “buffet” the wise man, even though they do not “overthrow” him: “bodily pain and infirmity,” “the loss of friends and children,” and “the ruin that befalls his country amid the flames of war.” “I do not deny that the wise man feels these things,” he says. “The wise man does receive some wounds.” Erasmus thus might seem to misinterpret Seneca. However, Seneca himself is inconsistent. At the end of *De constantia*, Seneca insists that the wise man is not altogether impervious to injury. “We do not claim for him the hardness of stone or of steel.”¹⁷ Yet this claim is in fact precisely the boast that he does make at the beginning of the essay. “The wise man is not subject to any injury. It does not matter, therefore, how many darts are hurled against him, since none can pierce him. As the hardness of certain stones is impervious to steel, and adamant cannot be cut or hewn or ground ... just so the spirit of the wise man is impregnable.”¹⁸

Seneca seizes upon two men above all as paragons of Stoic virtue: Socrates and Cato the Younger. Montaigne, as well, is fascinated by these two figures, although more sceptical; he returns to them repeatedly in his *Essays*, testing Seneca's claims about their *apatheia* against his own more grounded sense of human nature, and finally concludes that they were in fact prompted by emotion, even when they committed suicide. Shakespeare casts a different character, however, in the role of the possible *sapiens*: Brutus. Brutus combines, so to speak, the philosopher, Socrates, with the statesman, Cato. Cicero, Seneca, and Montaigne all reference his authorship of treatises on ethics, now lost.¹⁹ Cicero even dedicates two of his own philosophical treatises to Brutus, *De finibus* ('On Moral Ends') and *Paradoxa stoicorum* ('On the Paradoxes of the Stoics'), citing him there as a friend, a Stoic, and an interlocutor in an ongoing, lifelong debate.²⁰ Shakespeare shows his version of Brutus reading late into the night, just before the battle at Philippi, like Cato reading Plato's *Phaedo*, just before his suicide, and gives him in his funeral oration the distinctive, staccato "Attic" style associated with Stoic philosophy.

If anyone in *Julius Caesar* is Seneca's "phoenix," a hero of disinterestedness, it is Brutus: in his eulogy at the end of the play, Antony exalts him as "the noblest Roman of them all." The Roman people, too, see him, at least at first, as a paragon of virtue. When Cassius tells Casca that he might join their party, Casca is delighted. "O he sits high in the people's hearts" (5.5.69), Casca crows.

That which would appear offence in us
His countenance, like richest alchemy,
Will change to virtue and worthiness. (1.3.158-60)

The Roman people, they trust, will see his intervention as an expression of his sense of civic duty, rather than, as in their own case, an outbreak of spite. As Antony observes,

All the conspirators save only he
 Did that they did in envy of great Caesar.
 He only, in a general honest thought
 And common good to all, made one of them. (5.5.70-3)

Antony admires his fallen enemy's *pietas*: "a general honest thought." For Brutus himself, however, this same patriotism proves a troubling source of dissonance. The concern for the "common good" which Antony praises as the best part of his character cannot in practice be reconciled with the Stoic ideal of indifference.

In his study of the concept of "constancy" in Shakespeare's Roman plays, Geoffrey Miles presents it as divided between a familiar definition as "steadfastness," associated with Seneca, and a less familiar definition as "consistency," connected with Cicero.²¹ In his treatise *De officiis* ('On duties'), Cicero exhorts private citizens to engage in public life, taking on and fulfilling their proper "offices" or social roles for the good of the commonwealth, rather than remaining in more tranquil seclusion. Giles Monsarrat describes this sense of duty to the state as "a far cry from the self-sufficiency of the Stoic sage."²² Nonetheless, Miles feels comfortable in describing Cicero as a Stoic.²³ Cicero does not simply disagree with Stoicism, he argues, but instead co-opts it, redefining its core ethical ideal of "constancy-to-oneself" as "constancy-to-others." Constancy becomes a "means to an end" rather than an "end unto itself." "Cicero's ideal is a politician who has the moral qualities of a Stoic *sapiens*, but who uses them for the good of the commonwealth, rather than for his own self-perfection."²⁴

Miles is right to see a contrast between Cicero and Seneca, but their differences in this regard are not best explained as opposed interpretations of Stoicism. Shakespeare scholar Marvin Wawter claims, "The Stoic wise man sees himself as an independent entity unwilling to bind

himself to any specific community.”²⁵ Miles agrees, as well as Monserrat. Cicero’s sense, however, that even philosophers should engage in politics is entirely in keeping with the Stoic doctrine known as *oikeiōsis*, a term which is not easy to translate; it means, literally, “the process of making things home.” Sometimes it is rendered as “appropriation.” According to this aspect of Stoic thought, the philosopher should extend his sense of himself outward in concentric circles, first to his family, then his city, then his nation; finally, to the entire human race, thinking of them as part of himself, so that his natural sense of individual self-preservation becomes instead a more expansive, impartial concern for every human being.²⁶

The problem in this case is Seneca’s outsized influence on Neostoicism. Seeing him loom so large in the Renaissance imaginary, critics focused on Shakespeare and his contemporaries sometimes mistake Seneca for a more general philosophical standard, a touchstone of classical Stoicism. Compared to his sources, however, Seneca is eclectic and idiosyncratic. His occasional exhortations to his friend Lucilius to abandon public affairs are not representative of mainstream Hellenistic or even Roman Stoicism, but instead characteristic of a rival school of thought: Epicureanism. Seneca’s recurrent praise for a private life of leisure and seclusion reflects the Epicurean precept, *lathe biōsas* (“live unknown”).²⁷

Seneca is not entirely consistent on this point; his essay *De beneficiis* (“On benefits”), in particular, explaining the importance of reciprocal gift-giving, can be understood, like Cicero’s *De officiis*, as an articulation and re-imagination of the Hellenistic doctrine of *oikeiōsis*.²⁸ On the whole, however, his philosophical prose tends to glorify Epicurean self-sufficiency.²⁹ The attraction of retiring from court life, fraught with anxiety and danger, for a more carefree, tranquil life of primitive isolation also appears with great force in his tragedies, in the fantasies of protagonists such as Thyestes and Hippolytus.

In *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare illustrates the tension between Senecan Epicureanism and Ciceronian Stoicism in the contrast between the statue of Brutus’s ancestor, Lucius Junius

Brutus, and the man himself whom that statue represents. Striving to persuade Brutus to join his conspiracy against Caesar, Cassius calls this illustrious forebear to mind.

O, you and I have heard our fathers say
 There was a Brutus once that would have brooked
 Th' eternal devil to keep his state in Rome
 As easily as a king. (1.2.157-60).

Cassius's opening captures the importance to a Roman patrician such as Brutus of his sense of his place in a succession of noble patriarchs. "You and I have heard our fathers say..."

Sallust writes,

I have often heard that Quintus Maximus, Publius Scipio, and other eminent men of our country were in the habit of declaring that their hearts were set mightily aflame from the pursuit of virtue whenever they gazed upon the masks of their ancestors ... It is the memory of great deeds that kindles this flame, which cannot be quelled until they by their own prowess have equalled the fame and glory of their forefathers.³⁰

Cassius's final word, "king," is also well-chosen. As "Brutus once" drove out the last "king" of Rome, so now, he hopes, Brutus will help him forestall Caesar's imminent coronation.

Up until this point, Brutus has been noticeably still, silent, and cold, like a statue. He neglects his usual "shows of love"; his "look" is "veiled"; Cassius complains that his "hand" has become "stubborn and strange" (1.2.34-7). Cassius must go to great lengths to spark even the slightest "show / Of fire" (1.2.175-6). To help draw Brutus further out of his retreat into himself, Cassius hits upon an unusual expedient.

Good Cinna, take this paper

And look you lay it in the praetor's chair

Where Brutus may but find it. And throw this
 In at this window. Set this up with wax
 Upon old Brutus' statue. (1.3.142-6)

Less than twenty lines later, Shakespeare introduces a new character, as well, "Lucius," a young male attendant. Like Macbeth's valet, "Seyton," or Antony's, "Eros," the minor character's name is symbolic; carefully chosen to reveal the more central protagonist's inner psychomachia. Most immediately, "Lucius" is derived from *lux* (Latin, 'light'), and, appropriately enough, when he enters, Brutus asks him to fetch a taper. "Lucius" is also the praenomen, however, of "old Brutus": Lucius Junius Brutus. It is significant, therefore, that it is this character, "Lucius," who brings Brutus the first of Cassius' letters. Unsigned, the letters are designed to appear like missives from the Roman people at large. In addition, however, they give voice to Brutus's sense of his ancestor's example; his likely exhortation, if he were present. Cassius brings "old Brutus' statue" back to life. "Speak, strike, redress!" (2.1.47, 55) Invoking this older model of heroism proves effective in unmooring Brutus from his Senecan withdrawal. His response echoes Cassius's speeches earlier: "My ancestors did from the streets of Rome / The Tarquin drive, when he was called king" (2.1.53-4). By luring Brutus into this Ciceronian mode of heroism, however, Cassius sets him at odds with himself. In his eulogy, Antony praises Brutus for his public-spirited engagement in politics, much in the spirit of Cicero's *De officiis*. He admires Brutus's concern for the common good. Brutus himself, however, might well balk at this description; he seems to want to come across, instead, as a model of Senecan disengagement. Even at the cost of alienating his own inner circle, as well as the Roman masses, Brutus aspires to be seen as an philosopher, rather than a political hero: a paragon of transcendent detachment. In their opening conversation, Cassius complains to Brutus that he seems cold and standoffish. "I am not gamesome" (1.2.28), Brutus replies. "I do lack some part / Of that quick spirit that is in

Antony” (1.2.28-9). He strives to seem unmoved; much in contrast to Antony, he seems almost to pride himself on his own stillness and dissociation. Portia, too, complains that Brutus seems distant and devoid of affection. “Dwell I but in the suburbs / Of your good pleasure?” (2.1.284-5). What humanizes Brutus, then, and renders him a sympathetic figure, a hero despite himself, is precisely his failure at his own set task. He is unable to stick to his Stoic pride, and instead gives way to compassion, prefiguring the very different moral world of Christianity. As A. D. Nuttall writes, “His love for his wife and his grief at her death, ‘affections’ Brutus is proud to be able to repress, actually redeem him as a human being.”³¹

Under pressure, Brutus occasionally sets aside his performance of Stoic indifference, revealing emotions such as pity, grief, and anger. Unfortunately, however, he is only willing to let down his guard in private. This concern for his public reputation as a philosopher is much of the reason why his funeral oration is not more successful. He is not willing to be passionate in public, as Antony is. Instead, he tries to sway his audience through arid, impersonal argument. “Censure me in your wisdom” (3.216), he says, appealing to his fellow Romans’ faculty of reason. “Be patient to the last” (2.3.12). Conceding nothing to what we now might call *optics*, pausing at no point for any tug at the proverbial *heart-strings*, Brutus then presses *hoi polloi* with challenging counterfactuals and conditionals, in the manner of a present-day analytic philosopher. “Had you rather Caesar were living, and all die slaves, then that Caesar were dead, to live all free men?” (3.2.22-4). “If... if then ... this is my answer”:

Brutus’s brusque, interlocking “if... then...” statements call to mind the characteristic sorites of Hellenistic Greek Stoics such as Zeno, Cleanthes, and Chrysippus. “As he were ambitious, I slew him.” (3.2.26-7). In his dialogue *De finibus* (‘On moral ends’), Cicero, master orator, complains to Cato about the logic-chopping of the Stoics, gives an example, and rejects it out of hand as hopelessly unpersuasive: “‘Everything good is praiseworthy; everything

praiseworthy is moral; therefore everything good is moral.' What a rusty sword! Who would admit your first premise?"³²

Antony wins the people's hearts because Brutus, hindered by a peculiarly Stoic squeamishness, resolutely fails to pre-empt his rival's appeal to pathos. His insistence on his own detached logic baffles his audience, which fails to follow his reasoning. His carefully-cultivated persona of disinterest and scrupulous objectivity comes across as unnatural, even repugnant, rather than reassuring. Antony's tears, provocations, and mingling with the crowd; his display of Caesar's mangled, bloody cloak and corpse: these oratorical masterstrokes are left free to fill an emotional vacuum. "I will myself into the pulpit first," Brutus assures Cassius, "and show the reason of our Caesar's death" (3.1.236-7). "The reason": how far Brutus overestimates the power of such an appeal to reason becomes painfully clear only slightly later in the scene, when the plebeians begin to respond to Antony's patent emotional manipulation. "Methinks there is much reason in his sayings" (3.2.109), one remarks. Brutus gets no such commendation. Setting aside questions of rhetorical technique, to allow Antony to speak at all, even to allow him to remain alive, is a grave tactical error, as Cassius recognizes. "The people may be moved" (3.1.234), he tries to warn Brutus. "You know not what you do" (3.1.232). Brutus, however, consistently underestimates the power of emotions, including feelings such as loyalty or friendship, as well as romantic love.³³

As the play progresses, and the Roman Republic collapses into open civil war, all in time is not well between Brutus and Cassius. The two generals meet in Sardis after some time apart, and Cassius immediately accuses Brutus of betraying his trust. "Brutus, this sober form of yours hides wrongs" (4.2.40). Brutus urges Cassius to speak "softly," however, and retire into his tent, outside of sight of their respective armies. "Before the eyes of both our armies here," he suggests, "let us not wrangle" (4.3.43-5). Once he and Cassius are on their own, Cassius complains that Brutus ignored his request that Lucius Pella be pardoned, and Brutus accuses

him in exchange of “an itching palm” (4.3.10), selling “offices” to “undeservers” (4.3.11-12). Cassius responds with indignant protests, and the dispute degenerates into recrimination and grandstanding. Cassius threatens Brutus, and Brutus mocks him in return. “There is no terror, Cassius, in your threats, / For I am armed so strong in honesty / That they pass me by as the idle wind” (4.3.66-8). He, Brutus, will not “tremble,” “budge,” or “crouch” under Cassius’ “testy humour” (4.3.44-6).

In *De constantia*, Seneca compares the Stoic *sapiens* to “certain cliffs,” which, “projecting into the deep, break the force of the sea, and, though lashed for countless ages, show no traces of its wrath.”³⁴ Like these cliffs, or like Caesar, when he calls himself “Olympus” (3.1.74), Brutus will not be moved. In his account of the ideal Stoic hero, the hypothetical ‘wise man’, Seneca explains in some detail how he reacts to others’ anger. He is unruffled, disdainful, serene, just as Brutus pretends to be here: “he either fails to notice them, or counts them worthy of a smile.” Cassius, however, is cut to the quick by this show of casual contempt. “Have you not love enough to bear with me?” (4.3.118) he asks. Seeing that his friend is hurt, Brutus drops his frosty pretence. “When I spoke that,” he confesses, “I was ill-tempered too” (4.3.115). “Much enforced,” he admits he showed “a hasty spark” (4.3.111). Put to the test, his “love” for his friend Cassius overrides his Stoicism.

In his essay “Of books,” Montaigne cites Brutus’s private quarrelling with Cassius as a paradigmatic example of the discrepancy between a public persona and a private person. He begins by lamenting the loss of Brutus’s treatise on virtue, “for it is a fine thing to learn the theory from those who well know the practice.” Then he doubles back. “Theory” does not always correspond to “practice.” “But since the preachings are one thing and the preacher another, I am as glad to see Brutus in Plutarch as in a book of his own.” As in Shakespeare’s play, one episode in Brutus’s life stand out: “I would rather chose to know truly the conversation he held in his tent with some one of his intimate friends on the eve of a battle

than the speech he made the next day to his army.”³⁵ Montaigne likely has in mind here the same source-text for Shakespeare’s scene, a short passage in Plutarch’s biography of Brutus. “[Brutus and Cassius] went into a litle chamber together, and bad every man avoyde, and did shut the dores to them. Then they beganne to powr out their complaints one to another, and grew hot and lowed, earnestly accusing one another, and at length both fell a weeping.”³⁶

It may well be the case that Shakespeare was influenced by Montaigne’s musing about Brutus in his tent: his quarrel scene seems designed to fulfil Montaigne’s wish. In this case, however, Montaigne’s spirit echoes Plutarch’s own. At the beginning of his biography of Alexander the Great, Plutarch famously distinguishes himself from more traditional historians. “My intent is not to write histories, but only lives. For, the noblest deedes doe not always shew mens vertues and vices, but oftentimes a light occasion, a word, or some sporte makes mens natural dispositions and maners appeare more plaine, than the famous battells wonne, wherein are slaine tenne thowsande men.”³⁷ Seneca, too, stresses the need to examine philosophers’ lives for signs of hypocrisy. “Deed and word should be in accord.”³⁸

Shakespeare departs from Plutarch’s simpler narrative, however, by suggesting that Brutus not only fails to maintain his philosophical composure in private, but also that he deliberately tries to cover up that lapse, in order to preserve a public image of himself as a dispassionate Stoic. In Shakespeare’s version, Brutus is much more consciously performing the role of a Stoic *sapiens*. He insists that he and Cassius speak inside his tent, for instance, out of earshot of their men.

Brutus’s investment in his own reputation as an exemplary Stoic sage is most obvious, however, after this scene, in his reaction to the message from one of his captains, Messala, that his wife, Portia, is dead. Reconciling with Cassius after their heated exchange, Brutus calls for a bowl of wine: a symbol of self-indulgence and momentary emotional liberty. The wine calls to mind, as well, Cassius’ initial accusation, outside Brutus’s tent: “Brutus, this

sober form of yours hides wrongs” (4.2.40). Brutus is not as “sober” as he seems, literally as well as figuratively. “Wrongs,” moreover, takes on in retrospect an intriguing ambivalence. Cassius’ own meaning is that Brutus has wronged him as a friend; he has been unkind, unsympathetic. Brutus also hides “wrongs,” however, in a Stoic sense: he is more prone to emotional breakdown than he lets on. His studied persona of indifference is “form,” rather than “substance”: Cassius’ word “form” aptly suggests at once both a detached and unrealized ideal, like a Platonic form, and a hollow shell; an exterior show or pretence, as opposed to an authentic interior lived experience.

Cassius for his part marvels that Brutus lost his temper; Brutus, a man who prides himself above all on his emotional composure. “I did not think you could have been so angry” (4.3.141). Brutus replies, “O Cassius, I am sick of many griefs” (4.3.142). Cassius is surprised at this answer and chides Brutus gently, mostly in jest, for failing to abide by his Stoic principles. “Of your philosophy you make no use / If you give place to accidental evils” (4.3.143-4). Brutus’s pride is stung by this remark, however, and he responds with a slightly disturbing self-aggrandizement, as well as a clarification. “No man bears sorrow better. Portia is dead” (4.3.145). Cassius is shocked: again, Brutus’s “sober form hides wrongs” (4.2.40). From one perspective, that of a Stoic, he is in the wrong to be troubled by Portia’s death. As he admits, he is “sick with many griefs” (4.3.142). From another perspective, however, that of human compassion, he is in the wrong not to lament his wife’s death more fully and openly.

Brutus asks Cassius twice not to mention Portia’s death, as if afraid that if he does, he will not be able to contain his grief. “Speak no more of her” (4.3.170), he says; and again, “No more, I pray you” (4.3.164). Meanwhile, however, Messala and Titinius enter, bearing letters. Brutus presses Messala for news about Portia, and Messala tells him at last, reluctantly, that “she is dead, and by strange manner.” Without giving any indication that this is not the first

time he has heard of her death, Brutus then launches into a brief, startling, and again self-aggrandizing speech. “Why, farewell, Portia: we must die, Messala: / With meditating that she must die once / I have the patience to endure it now” (4.3.189-90). Messala is awed by this display of Stoic virtue, and he heralds Brutus straightaway as a paragon of heroic indifference. “Even so great men great losses should endure” (4.3.191). Cassius, however, knows better. “I have as much of this in art as you,” he tells Brutus, cryptically, “But yet my nature could not bear it so” (4.3.192-3). Like the audience, Cassius knows that Brutus is adopting a persona here. As T. S. Eliot says of Othello, he is “*cheering himself up*.”³⁹ He is, in fact, deeply affected by Portia’s death; he can barely keep himself from breaking down altogether. In order to impress his officers, however, he keeps up appearances. He wants to be seen as Stoic *sapiens*, not as a loving husband.

Some critics have found the so-called “double announcement” of Portia’s death so puzzling as to suggest some sort of mistake, either in the manuscript itself, or in the printer’s shop.⁴⁰ According to this account, two drafts of the announcement, an early and a late, were somehow both included in the only authoritative source for the play, the 1623 Folio. A detail in the second announcement, however, suggests that it was included in full awareness of the first. Messala tells Brutus that Portia died “by strange manner,” and Brutus does not ask him to explain what he means. It is difficult to believe that Shakespeare meant this passage to stand alone. To mention that Portia died “by strange manner” but not explain what that manner was would be an uncharacteristic disservice to his audience. Brutus’s ostensible lack of curiosity here is not a printer’s accident, but Brutus’s own deliberate deception of his officers. It is a ruse, and a revealing one, designed to suggest an incredible, awe-inspiring *apatheia*.

The audience, however, is supposed to see through Brutus’s set-piece speech; to see it as ironic in context. Shakespeare uses the double announcement of Portia’s death, apparent on

stage only to Cassius, to show that the “form” of the Stoic sage is at best a fiction: a persona which can be performed, like an actor’s role, but which cannot in fact be maintained at all times, in private life as well as in public. Shakespeare takes us backstage, so to speak, in order to allow us to see the incongruity between the performer and the performance. In Cassius’ terms, Shakespeare presents Stoicism as an “art” beyond the scope of human “nature.” Behind the façade of the superhuman Stoic philosopher, Shakespeare allows us to glimpse a different, more complex, and more plausible character. In his grief for his wife, as well as his kindness towards his friend, Brutus falls short of his own stringent philosophical standard. At the same time, however, he becomes a much more attractive human being: a hero in a different sense. Shakespeare’s would-be paragon of Stoic indifference turns out to be instead, in his very failure at his own set task, an admirable example of Christian compassion.

Patrick Gray

Durham University

¹ William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, ed. David Daniell. Arden Shakespeare, 3rd series. (London: Thomson Learning, 1998).

² Desiderius Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, trans. Clarence H. Miller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 45.

³ Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), 308-9.

⁴ For Horatio as “a curiously shadowy and undefined figure,” see D. G. James, *The Dream of Learning* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 72; cited in Gilles Monsarrat, *Light from the Porch: Stoicism and English Renaissance Literature*. Collection Études Anglaises, 86 (Paris: Didier-Érudition, 1984), 137.

⁵ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins. Arden Shakespeare, 2nd series. (London: Thomson Learning, 1982).

⁶ Sen. *Ep.* 59.14-16. All translations of Seneca's *Epistles* are from Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, trans. Richard M. Gummere. 3 vol. (London: William Heinemann; New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1917).

⁷ Sen. *Ep.* 117.29

⁸ Sen. *Ep.* 116.5

⁹ Cited in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, ed. and trans. A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 381.

¹⁰ Cited in Plut. *De Stoic.* 1041f, 1051a-b.

¹¹ Cited in Long and Sedley, *Hellenistic Philosophers*, 2:425.

¹² Cited in Sext. *Emp. Adv. Math.* 9.90.

¹³ Sen. *Ep.* 42.1.

¹⁴ Sen. *Const.* 7.1.

¹⁵ Erasmus, *Praise of Folly*, 45.

¹⁶ Sen. *Ep.* 71.27.

¹⁷ Sen. *Const.* 10.54.

¹⁸ Sen. *Const.* 3.5.

¹⁹ For Brutus's treatises *Peri kathēkontos* ('On Duties') and *De virtute* ('On Virtue'), see Sen. *Ep.* 94.45 and Cic. *Fin.* 1.8.

²⁰ For more on the possibility of a connection between Shakespeare's depiction of Brutus and Cicero's critique of Stoicism, see Marvin L. Vawter, "'After their Fashion': Cicero and Brutus in *Julius Caesar*," *SStud* 9 (1976): 205-19, as well as Vawter, "'Division 'tween our Souls': Shakespeare's Stoic Brutus," *SStud* 7 (1974): 174-95.

²¹ Geoffrey Miles, *Shakespeare and the Constant Romans* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

²² Monsarrat, *Light from the Porch*, 28.

²³ More specifically, Miles, *Constant Romans*, 19-21, argues "it is one of the paradoxes of Cicero's philosophical position [as a sceptical 'Academic'] that it is possible to call him both a Stoic and a founder of the 'anti-Stoic' tradition ... The essentially Stoic framework of his most famous works, the *Tusculan Disputations* and *De Officiis*, and the almost undiluted Stoicism of passages such as the account of emotions in *Tusculans* 4, justify the custom of referring to him casually as a 'Stoic.' On the other hand, he is sharply critical of some Stoic doctrines."

²⁴ Miles, *Constant Romans*, 5, vii, 29.

²⁵ Marvin L. Vawter, "*Julius Caesar*: Rupture in the Bond," 316, *JEGP* 72 (1973): 311-28.

²⁶ Secondary literature on Stoicism and *oikeiōsis* is too extensive to cite in full. For a very brief overview, see John Sellars, *Stoicism* (Chesham: Acumen, 2006), 129-33. For a more detailed discussion, see, e.g. Gisela Striker, “The Role of οἰκείωσις in Stoic Thought,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 1 (1983):145-67. Comprehensive studies include, notably, Roberto Radice, *Oikeiosis: Ricerche sul fondamento del pensiero stoico e sulla sua genesi* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2000) and Gretchen Reydam-Schils, *The Roman Stoics: Self, Responsibility, and Affection* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

²⁷ For Shakespeare’s perspective on Epicurean ethics, see Patrick Gray, “HIDE THY SELFE: Hamlet, Montaigne, and Epicurean ethics,” 213-36, in *Shakespeare and Renaissance Ethics*, ed. Patrick Gray and John D. Cox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

²⁸ Malcolm Schofield explains: “We know of numerous Stoic treatises entitled, *On appropriate action*, although the only survivor is Cicero’s transmutation, expansion, and far-reaching Romanisation of Panaetius’ version in his *On duties*. Another subject treated by more than one Stoic was *On acts of benefaction*: again, we possess only a Latin version, a massive work by Seneca in seven books devoted to the casuistry of a practice which was a major ingredient in the moral and social glue of Roman society.” Schofield, “Stoic Ethics,” 254, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics*, ed. Brad Inwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). For a detailed commentary on Seneca’s *De beneficiis* and its social and intellectual context, see Miriam T. Griffin, *Seneca on Society: A Guide to De Beneficiis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²⁹ See esp. Sen. *Ep.* 6-9, as well as 36.

³⁰ Sallust, “The War with Jugurtha,” 4-5, trans. J. C. Rolfe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

³¹ A. D. Nuttall, *Shakespeare the Thinker* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 185.

³² Cicero, *On Moral Ends*, 4.48, ed. Julia Annas, trans. Raphael Wolf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

³³ In his dialogue *De amicitia* (“On friendship”), Cicero warns of the possibility of the classical discourse of friendship being misused by demagogues such as Caesar and Mark Antony. See esp. his discussion of Tiberius Gracchus, 35-44.

³⁴ Sen. *Const.* 3.5.

³⁵ Montaigne, *Essays*, 302.

³⁶ Plutarch, “The Life of Marcus Brutus,” trans. Thomas North, 114, in *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, ed. Geoffrey Bullough (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 5: 90-135.

³⁷ Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, trans. Thomas North (London: AMS Press, 1967; 1st ed. 1579), 4:298.

³⁸ Sen. *Ep.* 20.3; cp. 29.5-6, 52.9, 108.36-7.

³⁹ T. S. Eliot, "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca," 129, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 126-40.

⁴⁰ For more on this controversy, see esp. Thomas Clayton, "Should Brutus never taste of Portia's death but once? : text and performance in *Julius Caesar*," *SEL* 23 (1983): 237-55, and Warren D. Smith, "The duplicate revelation of Portia's death," *SQ* 4 (1953): 153-61; cp. Fredson Bowers, "The copy for Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*," *South Atlantic Bulletin* 43 (1977-8): 23-36, and Brents Stirling, "*Julius Caesar* in revision," *SQ* 13 (1962): 187-205.